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ABSTRACT

Equity of access is one of the American Library Association's (ALA's) five key action areas. Discussions of digital divide issues sometimes sound confusing and unfocused; however, the digital divide issue provides information professionals with the opportunity to discover more about their own skills and potential, to understand more about library patrons, and to support the dissemination of exemplary model projects currently underway in libraries. This paper suggests that it is time not only to highlight successful attempts to lessen unequal participation in the creation and use of digital record, but to provide individual ALA members with a toolkit to successfully convert their libraries into laboratories of discovery. These laboratories will be interactive environments where information professionals involve library patrons in the creation of content and services for communities in need. The paper outlines one potential continuing education resource, a Web site with intelligent features, that can provide ALA members with workplace fluency in the issues, applications, and skills to accomplish this vision. (AEF)

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Continuing Professional Library and Information Science Education for Advancing Equity of Access

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Equity of access is one of the American Library Association's five key action areas. It is also one of the goals of ALAction 2005. Unlike the other key action areas—diversity, education and continuous learning, intellectual freedom, and 21st century literacy—we have yet to engage in meaningful explorations of how this concept relates to our profession.

We sometimes encounter discussions of digital divide issues that sound confusing and unfocused. Some approach digital exclusion from a geographic perspective, considering the present and projected state of technology access, use, and creation in particular areas of the world. Others discuss these issues from a technological perspective on a spectrum from low-tech to high-tech, from building infrastructure to maintaining or upgrading connectivity. Some define the digital divide in terms of demographics of access, considering the needs of specific audiences, segmenting the potential user community by ethnicity, education level, income, physical ability, age, or other demographics. Discussions also consider the social and policy issues affected by inequitable access to technology, such as literacy and civic participation.

If there is no agreement on what the digital divide is, the extent to which it exists, or what terminology is acceptable, then how do we proceed to plan services that provide equity of access for our clientele? It may be more productive to consider digital divide or equity of access issues less as obligations or points of dissension than as laboratories of discovery. The digital divide provides information professionals with the opportunity to discover more about their own skills and potential, to understand more about library patrons, and to support the dissemination of exemplary model projects currently underway in libraries.

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Some information professionals are currently engaged in challenging and innovative programs that attempt to lessen inequalities of access to technology. Others are—or should be—interested in these efforts. How do we identify model programs?
How do we determine our present skill level? How do we locate new continuing education opportunities to prepare ourselves to implement an equity of access service? Information specialists may feel overwhelmed by their training or re-tooling needs.

There have been several national models to help teachers integrate technology into classrooms. Notable among these have been the U. S. Department of Education's Technology Innovation Challenge Grants and PT3 Grants (Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology) and Intel's Teach to the Future Program.[1] Some programs follow a train-the-trainer model. Others provide module-based curriculum for self-directed learning. Mentoring features provide person-to-person advice for participants in some projects. Information professionals also need the opportunity to participate in similar staff development programs that will allow us to improve our skills and contribute to dynamic user service environments. We should be able to look to ALA, our professional organization, for skills assessment and skills training.

What would such a continuing education resource for information professionals look like? Such a service should be easily accessed, easily understood, and customized to serve individual needs. This continuing education service could be an interactive tool that could serve both as an alerting mechanism for new developments and opportunities and also as a personalized continuing education advisor. We can imagine that it might take the form of a Web site with intelligent features. Figure 1 illustrates a model for this site's architecture.

Some learners prefer to follow a 'building block' approach, acquiring understanding by studying historical development of issues and practices. These ALA members may consult a

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[1] U.S. Department of Education. "TICGP. Technology Innovation Challenge Grant Program." Available (April 2002): <http://www.ed.gov/Technology/challenge/about.html>; U.S. Department of Education. "PT3. Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology." Available (April 2002): <http://www.ed.gov/teachtech/>; Intel. Education Programs. "Intel Teach to the Future." Available (April 2002): <http:// www.intel.com/education/teach/.

feature on the Web site that presents a timeline of ALA's involvement with digital divide/equity of access efforts from the passage of Library Services Act in the 1950s to the latest developments. ALA offices, divisions, chapters, other units, and ALA affiliates can provide content that illustrates their current or noteworthy efforts on equity of access issues.[2]

Because of differences in learning style, some ALA members will want to read about the digital divide. The Web site should include summaries of background readings, a customized glossary, as well as an itemized list of related facts gleaned from research reports. Others will want to build a theory base through reading reports and articles that provide research results or more-in depth opinion pieces. The professional equity of access continuing education Web site would, therefore, provide selected links to current readings, including reports such as "A Nation Online" and responses to this report.[3] Readers wanting to pursue detailed information could be provided with updated alerting messages. Readings and statistics can be organized under demographics of access (e.g., gender or ethnicity). Research results should be searchable by keyword, variable, or unit (e.g., household data or country level data).

Others learners will want to access model programs so they might replicate services successful in other information settings and/or create new services. Some ALA members will want to communicate with others as they continue their explorations. The Web site might incorporate some levels of interactivity, including an opportunity for viewers to post questions related to discussion areas or to examples of best practices. ALA members might communicate through hosted chat or discussion areas. These learners may want abstracts and links to meaningful projects such as Austin Public Library's and Nashville Public Library's Dell Wired for Youth Centers. In Austin, young adults flock to after school programs in "Wired for Youth"

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[2] A sample relevant document is ALA. Office for Information Technology Policy. Digital Divide. Available (April 2002) http://www.ala.org/oitp/digitaldivide/index.html

[3] U. S. Department of Commerce. A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet. Washington, DC: GPO, 2002. Available (April 2002) <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/index.html>; The Children's Partnership. "A Nation Online"—Who's Not Online and Why it Matters. Available (April 2002) http://www.techpolicybank.org/2002commercereport.html.

areas in public library branches where they can build Web sites or produce an in-house radio program. Still other links could connect ALA members to other professional partners actively involved in equity of access initiatives such as the National Indian Telecommunications Institute (NITI) and the Benton Foundation's Digital Network Web site.[4]

The Web site also provides the opportunity to present unique features in creating a resource personalized for each ALA member. This personal assessment tool will allow ALA members to evaluate their own skills and link to sources for additional education/training. The Web site could provide links to competency documents, such as those prepared by the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC).[5] Competencies may be annotated to illustrate best practices or even biographies of information professionals who illustrate high levels of competency achievement. Checklists or other recording sheets could be appended to competency documents, providing interested readers with a mechanism to record their level of attainment of specified competencies. Other Web content could include testing/drilling devices that enable members to review learned content. Similarly, the site could link to Web sites of schools of library and information science, providing connections to continuing education offerings and/or post-professional certification programs.

ALA members may not only want information about how to assess their current skills but they may also welcome direction on how prepare to acquire new skills. The Web site could not only provide a searchable database of descriptions of continuing education examples but could also present individualized learning profiles developed through an intelligent agent. Individual ALA members would rank continuing education examples, providing examples of their 'likes' and 'dislikes.' The intelligent agent would search the descriptions of these rated continuing education events to construct a profile of the user's continuing education interests. Once the

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[4]National Indian Telecommunications Institute. Available (April 2002): <http:www.niti.org/index.html>; Benton Foundation. The Digital Divide Network. Available (April 2002): <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/sections/index.cfm>

[5]Association for Library Services to Children. Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries, Revised Edition. Available (April 2002): <http://www.ala.org/alsc/competencies.html>

intelligent agent learns the user's profile, it uses a machine-learning algorithm to predict the ranking of other continuing education opportunities and presents these rankings to the user. The system may also be able to provide explanations for its recommendations.[6] Learners could save their profiles, revise them over time, and receive automated alerting notices of continuing professional education events that they might find potentially interesting. This feature on the Web site might be tied to a device to measure and tally continuing education credits or units. ALA members could provide these records to present or future employers.

The measure of success of the site could be assessed by number of hits, critique obtained through a feedback form, and contributions by information professionals to the content. Usability studies provide us with additional methods on how to evaluate Web sites including direct observation of actual use of a site, participation in electronic discussion boards, and logs of users 'point and click' decisions when they visit a site.

It is time to not only highlight successful attempts to lessen unequal participation in the creation and use of the digital cultural record but to provide individual ALA members with a toolkit to successfully convert their libraries into laboratories of discovery. These laboratories will be interactive environments where information professionals involve library patrons in the creation of content and services for communities in need. This concept paper has outlined one potential resource that can provide ALA members with workplace fluency in the issues, applications, and skills to accomplish this challenging vision.[7]

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[6]For an example of a similar intelligent agent that uses information extraction and a machine-learning algorithm for text categorization to recommend books to readers see Raymond J. Mooney and Loriene Roy, "Content-Based Book Recommending Using Learning or Text Categorization," In Proceedings of the Fifth ACM Conference on Digital Libraries (San Antonio, TX: June 2000), 195-204.

[7]The Implementation Report for the Second Congress on Professional Education calls for a `digital clearinghouse for continuing professional education.' This proposed Web site on equity of access would be a concrete expression of this recommendation. See American Library Association. Second Congress on Professional Education: Initial Implementation Report. Available (April 2002): <http:/www.ala.org/congress/2nd_congress/finalimplementation.html>

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